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ABSTRACT

It is the responsibility of an inhouse film group to ensure that communication is maximized while holding expenses to a minimum. Many productions spend more than is necessary to effectively convey a message by employing: (1) overwritten scripts; (2) complex structure; (3) costly talent, sets, locales, special effects, and musical scores. The challenge to a film designer should be to use only enough resources to effectively communicate the idea of the film while resisting excesses which add nothing to the content of the idea. (EMH)

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THE INFORMATION FILM MANAGER--THE RESOURCE MONITOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the communication effectiveness of films as a function of resource expenditures. Also, it details some conceptual and production pitfalls that consume vast resources and that contribute little if any to achieving the film's communication goals.

INTRODUCTION

The primary responsibility of the manager of an in-house film group is to provide the resources necessary for the group to get its job done. This job, typically, is the creative process of solving communication problems with films. The resources are defined as people, time, contractor support, space, equipment, and administration.[1] I've omitted money per se from this list because in this context it is an inherent element of each resource.

It follows, then, the manager's ancillary duty is to ensure optimum utilization of these resources in the filmmaking process. For each film, an expenditure of some certain amount of resources will, if used with judicious care, effect a satisfactory solution to the communication problem--the film will fulfill the goals set for it. This assumes a high level of creative and technical competence; that is, few if any resources are needed to overcome ineptitude of any kind, at any level, or at any phase of production. The job is done right the first time in planning and in execution.

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[1] S. Martin Shelton. The Information Film Manager--The Resource Provider. Information Film Producer's of America, Inc., 15th Annual Conference, 17-19 October 1974, San Diego, California.

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Resource expenditures in excess of this certain or "optimum" level by and large do not contribute much to audience understanding or overall communications. Rather, these additional expenditures add mostly superfluous gloss--a gloss frequently used to disguise ineptness, albeit usually subliminally. In fact with today's sophisticated audiences, born to the 20-second spot commercial and bred on pinpoint, uniconcept, audio-visual messages, this gloss clouds the communication. The audience can neither discern the message clearly nor weigh its importance because it is much diluted in tone and distorted in perspective. In the extreme, the message is lost.

For films made solely for the personal pleasure of the producer or films of pure aesthetics, anything goes--and should. These types of films, obviously, are outside the scope of this paper.

FRITTERING AWAY RESOURCES

"Gloss" assumes many guises--appearing in all phases of production from concept to laboratory. It most frequently appears, however, as baroque conceptual planning (scripting) and as overembellished production values. For example, glossy scripts usually are overwritten in syntax, style, and structure. They are frequently too long--long in screen time, long in verbiage, and long in miscellaneous messages--but significantly short of the information needed to accomplish the communications intended.

Information films are produced in many styles. Theatricalism is one favorite; others are cinema verité, kinestasis, man-on-the-street testimony or inner thought, and pseudocinema verité. While these styles are valid, fun, and exhilarating, they are expensive. And without careful planning

and judicious implementation these styles easily can cloud the essential elements of information. More often than not, I suspect, these types of films are more satisfying to the film designer[2] than to the audience. Standard straightforward exposition, voice-over narration style is one style that engenders good communication with most audiences.

Complex film structure, involving for example elaborate subplots, retrograde development, and symbolism, tends to confuse the film's inherent message. Usually a simple linear development will ensure maximum communication.

However, care must be used. Unwittingly, it's easy to patronize and bore today's sophisticated audiences. When this happens, communication ceases. Yet I've found audiences appreciate straightforward honesty and accept it readily. Failure is ensured, if the film comes over as just another training film or another public relations film, for example. Audiences have seen too many of these--and they are ready for, and deserve, sterner stuff. Short, single-concept, pinpoint communication films that have very strong visual development are one answer.

The list of overembellished production values is long, and some deserve special mention because they are such flagrant squanderings of resources and typify overall lack of in-depth audience analysis and cursory planning of the communication process. Some of these are

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[2] S. Martin Shelton. A Writer Is a Writer--but a Film Writer Should Be More. 21st International Technical Communications Conference, 15-18 May 1974, St. Louis, Missouri.

1. Expensive and name talent in front of and behind the camera (with the attendant folderol) when equally competent or superior talent is available at much less cost.
2. Exotic locales when inexpensive sets or backdrops or even stock footage would suffice
3. Expensive sets and stage shooting when a close-by, easily accessible location is more apt
4. Costly special effects when simple models or other techniques would do
5. Complex opticals, including split screen, when straight cuts would suffice
6. Elaborate staging and execution of a sequence requiring a large crew when a simple documentary approach would be more realistic
7. Complex or cartoon animation when much simpler techniques would have near equal communication value
8. Original score instead of stock music, and
9. Esoteric images that have meaning only to the film designer when conventional, close-up photography has the real communication value.

This list is not intended to be all-inclusive--but rather to highlight some of the more obvious pitfalls.

It follows, then, that production and postproduction should be accomplished with minimum expense to make the film look natural yet not sterile. This imposes stringent self-discipline on the film designer. And yet it ensures a flexible approach to changing circumstances, particularly in dealing with the client who might believe "the bigger

the better;" that is, it's the gloss that makes the film look impressive and expensive, ergo good--all to the sacrifice of the film's original objective: communication.

SPEND ENOUGH

Spend enough resources to get maximum return on the investment. As film designers and managers we should recognize the delicate balance between extravagance and niggardliness. Sometimes in trying to achieve the optimum level we'll not expend enough to accomplish the film's goals. Too many economies are made in planning, production, and postproduction; and the film fails. These films are easily recognizable. They have a distinctive aura about them--sometimes dubbed nonprofessional. Resources too much economized are lost, and the communication problem remains.

It is axiomatic that a film can have production value yet be produced under austere conditions. This is determined by *how* the resources are expended. For example, from time to time we use a well-known character actor who charges 50% over scale--normally an extravagance we avoid. However, this actor is very versatile and is just right for those parts that demand something extra to bring them off. He gives a highly creditable performance every time. He seldom misses a cue, a line, or piece of business. *Take One* is good. Clearly in this instance, spending more than the minimum is worthwhile--a very high return is realized for a small extra investment. The return is almost exponential as a function of overall resource expenditures required for synchronous sound shooting and for total communication value. Austerity is achieved by concentrating on essentials. A plain cyclorama (cyc) or simple stylized backdrop is used in lieu of expensive sets or difficult locations. Audiences accept this readily; in fact, they appreciate its simple honesty--as they appreciate the professionalism of the actor.

INSUFFICIENT FUNDING

Sometimes after the film designer has planned his film, the budget is cut--a common occurrence in an in-house film group. The manager and film designer must make the fundamental decision to proceed or not--a decision frequently never made because the need is not recognized and therefore never addressed.

If the decision is made to proceed, the film's goals and scope must be reduced to accommodate the reduced resources available for production. Again, in this instance the film designer should strive for optimum communication within the new framework--maintaining a high level of quality and professionalism. I've found this sort of mental and physical discipline, over the long term, contributes greatly to the professionalism of the film designer. He tends to be more innovative, creative, and responsive; yet not at the expense of a businesslike approach to his films.

If the scope and goals of a film cannot be reduced, it's best not to start production. Explore those communication media that require less resources to produce and yet are effective in their own fashion--publications, slides, and tapes for example. You may not have a film, but you just might have a satisfied customer whose communication problem is solved.

THE CHALLENGE

The thrust of this paper is not to say information films must all be artistic, dull, and without innovation. Rather, I'm suggesting that the film designer needs to analyze carefully each element planned for his film and evaluate its communication value as an individual element and as to its overall effect on the film. Those elements that contribute significantly to better understanding--audience acceptance, satisfaction, and goodwill--and that promise good return on the investment should be used. Make maximum use of the medium.

However difficult, for clear communication the film designer must ruthlessly subjugate his creative and artistic needs to the needs of the audience.

If in the development of clear communication the film designer can also satisfy his own creative and artistic needs, so much the better. The fullest rewards of the film are achieved--an ideal goal. Perhaps the real challenge for today's information film designer is to make his films lively, contemporary, "entertaining," and self-rewarding, yet to ensure that each film has optimum communication value for the least expenditure of resources.